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Costume as art

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COSTUME AS ART

by

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Section I Introduction

Any given article of clothing can be seen as falling somewhere along a broad continuum that stretches between the completely functional and the completely decorative. On one end of the spectrum, utility dominates; military clothing, designed to promote uniformity and to maximize human performance, might define this extreme. On the opposite pole, function is totally disregarded in favor of pure adornment, even flamboyance - say, Carmen Miranda's hat.

Most modern clothing leans unabashedly toward the functional side. As cultural diversity has been sacrificed for economic development, traditional rituals, ceremonies and celebrations have been lost; with them have gone the clothing and costumes that brought them to life. Colorful, conspicuous, often symbolic, and made of virtually any available material, these clothes clearly were designed with little concern for function, or even comfort.

I created these breast plates in the spirit of these exotic works of wearable art, choosing decoration over function. To underscore this choice, I used glass as my fabric, thereby producing distinctly impractical "armor."

Section II Clothing As Art

> The history of clothes ... offers ample confirmation of the predominant part played by the desire for adornment. It is as strong now as it was when naked man hung the first string of beads around his neck, and, as an afterthought, draped a little something around his middle. (1)

The purpose of clothing goes well beyond one's basic need to protect oneself from enemies and the elements. Clothing has served as a means of expressing one's religious beliefs, national loyalty or social standing. Silk, satin and velvet have always been associated with royalty, while the working class has adorned itself in more utilitarian cloths. Madras cotton has come to be synonymous with the country of its origin, India. Ancient armor not only served as encasement with which one protected oneself in battle; it became wearable artwork, complete with precious metal inclusions and chased designs.

Clothing, like so many other elements of culture, has often been subject to trends. During Napoleon and Josephine's heyday in France, Josephine's diaphanous outfits became popular among the female social elite. Women expressed their wealth and stature by wearing less and less. It even became a game of sorts to guess the weight of women's outfits -- the very stylish never wore more than half a pound of clothing, and that was including any shoes or jewelry she might add to the ensemble. Fortunately for the health of women living in colder climates, this fashion statement never caught on outside of Paris.

(1) Adams, J. Donald, Naked We Came, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, chicago, San Francisco, 1967. Page 23.

Ostentation was the rule of thumb not only for the fashions of the social elite, but it has also factored into military dress codes:

> By the seventeenth century man had abandoned armor but he certainly had not done with such habiliments as he thought suitable for war. These were to reach the peak of ostentation and glamour in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Plumes and spiked helmets, bearskin busbies, epaulets, gold and silver cord - he went to war as if he were going to costume ball....Not until World War I did it occur to him that possibly there was less chance of his being potted if he blended better with the landscape....(2)

The attention to decorative detail on medieval armor carried over to military clothing. Satin, lace and brocade were used to identify rank and affiliation. Today, however, these decorative details are reserved for parades and ceremonial occasions. As necessity dictated, military wear became "uniform" -- by definition, its intent is to remove individuality. More recently, armor has resurfaced in the form of bulletproof vests. Worn out of sight, these modern "breastplates" completely shun the decorative detail that the ancient warrior felt was imperative.

One area of dress that has managed to maintain some degree of its original splendor and pageantry is the native costumery of various regions and countries. Though now generally worn only for ceremonial purposes -- and seemingly more infrequently at that -- the fabrics and designs of these outfits do much to express the customs and beliefs of the people that they represent. In their book, Cloth and the Human Experience, Jane Schneider and Annette Weiner discuss the following example:

(2) Ibid, page 91

> The traditional Zapotec Indian wedding dress [was] once offered by grooms to their brides but [is] made today for boutique and tourist markets whose buyers live in, or come from, the industrial United States and Europe. Decorated with colorful inserts of hand-embroidered birds and flowers, the dress is laden with sentiment. To the young Oaxacan women who traditionally received it, the embroidery conferred a religious blessing; to many contemporary North American and European consumers, it represents a nostalgia for lost arts, for the people and crafts that industrial capitalism so brutally pushed aside. (3)

The authors go on to explain that, for the women who create the embroidery, many of whom live in the poorest outlying areas, this has always been a cottage industry of sorts. The embroiderers view their work "in relation to its monetary return in profits or piece rates.(4)" Because these artists have always treated their craft as a profession, the original flavor of the costume has been retained despite the fact that its cultural/symbolic value has all but disappeared.

Other such clothing has not survived the transition; in the absence of either a commercial market or some anthropological value, ceremonial costumes have little chance of outliving the ritual or custom that inspired them in the first place.

(3) Schneider, Jane & Weiner, Annette, B., Cloth and the Human Experience, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, DC., 1989. Page 15.

(4) Ibid.

Section III My Work And How It Relates

The inspirations for my work come from many different places, such as photographs, films, and sketches from my own travels. These inspirations work together as components so that the end result is not decipherable as coming from any one source. For instance, the Brazilian Bustiere (Plate 1) was initially inspired by the movie Black Orpheus, the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice, set in Brazil during Carnival. Though hopelessly outdated, the film is very imaginative, and I expect to see its return to popularity in the near future in the form of kitsch. In addition to the colorful costumes and general imagery of this film, my impressions of Brazil have been shaped by tapestries and other art forms unique to that South American culture. For example, on Brazilian Bustiere, streaks of color emerge from a purple background, terminating in vortical swirls over the bust area; this is reminiscent of the coiling technique commonly used by Brazilian potters.

Another piece, Catalonian Corset (Plate 2), is a direct interpretation of a flamenco dancer's costume. The ribbons and rhinestones are represented by bead color, size and stringing technique. The presence of gloves helps to imply a complete outfit, perhaps creating the illusion one has just stepped into the dancer's dressing room.

Hawaiian Habiliment (Plate 3) celebrates the lush beauty of a tropical polynesian habitat. Long tubes of green glass suggest reeds or grass thatched together to form a fabric. A fringe of leaves borders the bottom, and a lei of colorful blossoms lines the top of the piece. The diagonal neckline suggests a single-strap garment, which further contributes to the "island feel" of the piece by conjuring images of sunny days and balmy nights.

The piece entitled Accouterment Atlantis (Plate 4) draws from various legends and folklore associated with the sea. In designing this piece I combined the colors and images which I feel are the most universal symbols of the ocean. Various shades of blue are combined with clear beads to express aquatic properties. Green strands of "seaweed" accent the piece, drawing the eye across the top and down to the fish-scale skirt. As with the flowered lei on Hawaiian Habiliment , the fish scales in this piece represent a challenge I set forth for myself to see just how far I could go with inclusions and not interfere with the integrity of the basic beaded structure. I partially buried this piece in sand to suggest an artifact that has washed up onto a beach. To complete the effect, the piece is enclosed in an aquarium and displayed on a pillared pedestal designed to invoke ancient architecture.

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An issue with which I concerned myself during the evolution of this body of work was one that was so eloquently addressed by the artist Judy Chicago in her installation The Dinner Party. In this particular body of work, Ms. Chicago "sets a table" for a number of women of historical significance; each place setting at the table is composed of items that somehow pertain to one of these important women. Emily Dickinson's plate, for example, is made from a lace doily that was coated with a ceramic glaze and fired to take on a porcelain appearance.

Like The Dinner Party, I feel that my work is an homage to women. However, rather than honoring specific women, as Chicago does by setting individual places at her "table," I chose to widen my scope, focusing on entire groups of women united culturally and geographically.

By stressing diversity in my tribute, I am in fact trying to emphasize commonality. Despite **individual variation**, groups of women are tied together by history and circumstance; my costumes depict four such groupings, either real or fictional. More importantly, by presenting four very different images together, I am suggesting that all women are united by a single set of beliefs and experiences. These universal links transcend clothing as well as the history, culture and geography which influence it.

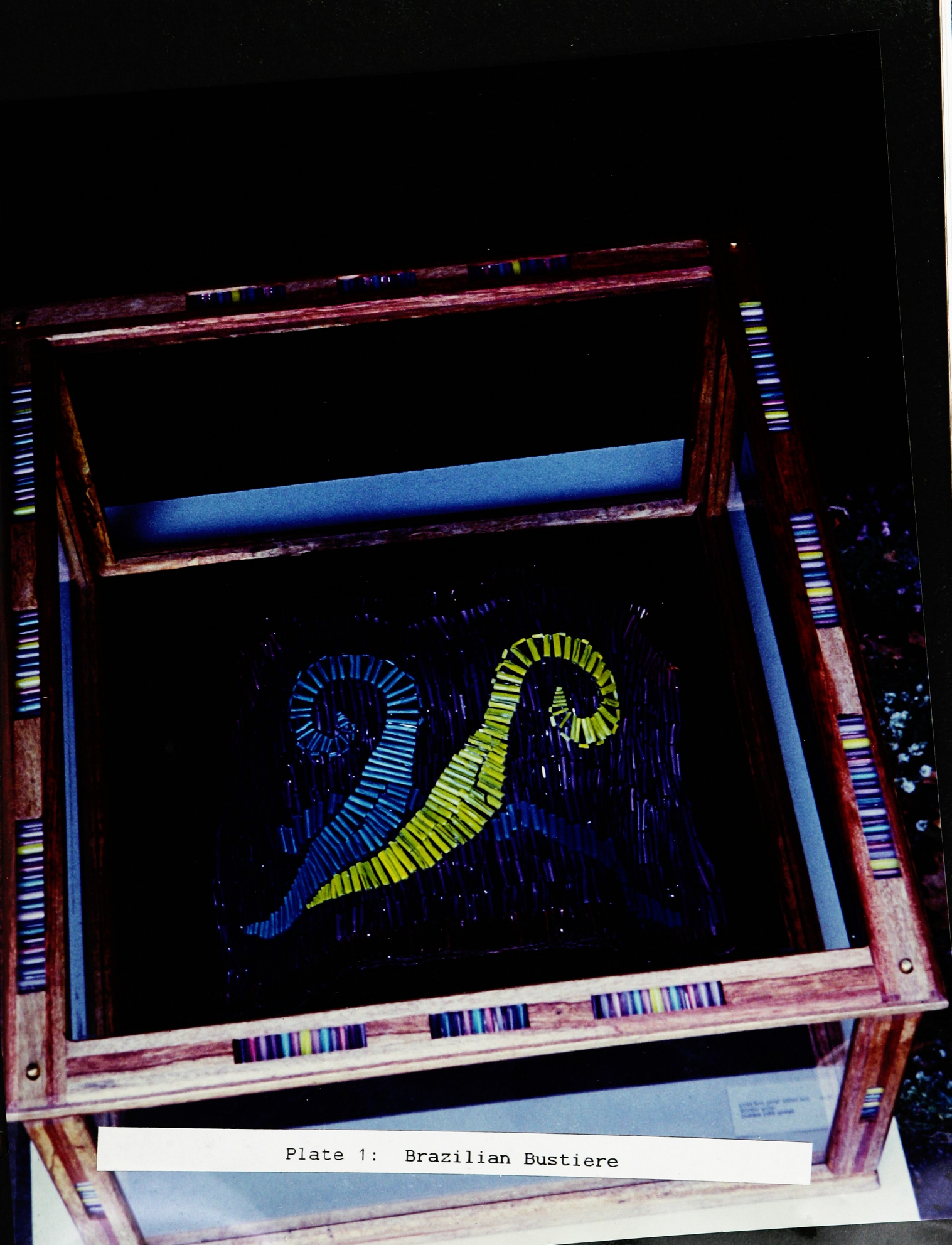

Plate 1: Brazilian Bustiere

Plate 2: Catalonian Corset

Plate 3: Hawaiian Habiliment

Plate 4: Accouterment Atlantis

Section IV Technical Notes

All of my sculptures consist of the same basic components. These are glass tubing and copper wire. The tubes are cut into beads of predetermined lengths. I do not bother with firepolishing, as the time spent in the slumping lair takes care of that.

Once I have my bead stock pulled (between ten and fifteen 20-foot pulls), I begin by drawing out a pattern on which I indicate color changes and any design that is worked directly into the main weaving. I work directly over this pattern, thus ensuring accurate length and width measurements. Different bead stringing techniques provide a variety of results. When I finish this step, I have a securely woven piece that holds together but has a bit of "give" to it.

The next step is fusing, which melts the piece enough so that the beads stick together. The piece is laid out on a piece of fiberfrax on a kiln shelf and heated to a temperature of 1325 degrees F.* A sample fusing schedule is as follows:

Ramp to 950 in 3 hours, soak for 2 hours.
Ramp to 1325 in 25 minutes, soak for 20 minutes.
Vent down to 950 in 5 minutes,
Soak at 950 for 4 hours.
Ramp down to 750 in 3 hours, soak for 3 hours.
Turn off lair and let cool down slowly - 7 to 8 hours.
Vent if necessary.

I found this schedule worked well for me, but I varied it somewhat depending on the thickness of the piece and the amount of time I had to work with. As with any firing schedule, I achieved the best results by running a sample firing.

* All temperatures given in this section are in Fahrenheit.

My sculptural pieces all were fired twice. For the second firing, however, the beaded piece was laid on top of a mold. The mold is made of stoneware-type clay rolled out to a one-inch thickness, draped over a female model (or mannequin), and then fired to a temperature of about 1800 degrees. The mold was layered with fiberfrax -- which I found to be very convenient for altering the physical characteristics of the mold -- and the beaded piece was gently placed on top. The schedule for the second firing closely resembled that of the first, with the top temperature reaching only 1250 degrees.

The additional components of Hawaiian Habiliment and Accouterment Atlantis were fabricated using a variety of methods. Flower blossoms were blown and added to Hawaiian Habiliment after the final slumping. The leaves (beads and copper wire) also were attached cold, allowing them to drape and move as real leaves would. The fish scales on Accouterment Atlantis began as cylinders that were cut open and slumped flat. The scale shapes were then cut from the flattened sheets of glass, and placed on a kiln shelf in overlapping rows. Wads of fiberfrax were tucked under each scale, and the whole arrangement was then fused and slumped, following a schedule similar to those previously listed.

Footnotes

1. Adams, J. Donald, Naked We Came, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, Chicago, San Francisco, 1967. Page 23.

2. Ibid. Page 91.

3. Schneider, Jane & Weiner, Annette B., Cloth and the Human Experience, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, DC, 1989. Page 15.

4. Ibid.

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